

Sugar Bush Adventure at White Meadows Farms

Written & Photographed by
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White Meadows Farms is located on 600 acres west of Short Hills Provincial Park. About 180 acres are sugar maples, the best kind for maple syrup.



White Meadows Farms near St. Catharines draws crowds eager to experience a Sugar Bush Adventure on a warm spring day.



People wait for the wagon to take them back for pancakes and the petting farm.

A tractor-drawn wagon carries visitors through the rolling hills to the Sugar Bush.

Richard Bering of White Meadows Farms, Master Sugar Maker, loads the fire box that heats the evaporator.



Anna and Vera portray natives at a pre-Colonial era Chippewa campsite, boiling maple sap with fire-heated rocks.



Logan stands guard over three boiling cauldrons, demonstrating 17th-century syrup making.

An old-style spile and bucket on a maple tree.



Toria explains to fascinated children, how and why 40 litres of raw sap become one litre of maple syrup.

Richard Bering looks pretty chipper this morning as he tosses another load of wood into the massive burning firebox of his maple syrup evaporator. His trademark top hat sits gamely on his head. Surprising, since he found himself in the woods at 3:00 a.m. this morning picking up another load of raw maple sap from the 11,000-litre collection tank. It was his third pick-up in the past 24 hours, although during the high season of the sap run, he may make as many as five trips a day.

About a kilometer away, children crowd around the campfire in the snowy recesses of a majestic maple forest, partly to fend off the cold, but also because around this fire two high school students dressed as Chippewa natives demonstrate how maple syrup may have been discovered centuries ago. The Chippewa shared the treat with Europeans hundreds or perhaps thou-

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sands of years later, and in a cold February, White Meadows Farms south of St. Catharines passes it on.

Richard Bering, the fourth generation at the working farm and sugar bush, smiles at the thought. His best customers are aged two to 10. They love the actors, the wagon ride and the maple taffy treats. Their parents love the pancake breakfast, the trail through the woods, and the hot dogs and Pepperettes roasted over an open blaze from early January to early April.

Bering is Master Sugar Maker in addition to director of marketing, while his brother, Nicholas, manages the Sugar Bush Adventure, now in its second decade. Both have been involved with the property since toddlers, even playing native children in the native village years ago.

The family owns about 600 acres in some of the prettiest Escarpment area filled with valleys and rolling hills just west of the Short Hills Provincial Park border. About 180 acres are sugar maples, the best kind of maple tree for maple sugar.

“My great-great grandfather moved the family here from out west in 1939,” says Bering. “The red brick bungalow over there is the same one that they moved into and it’s at least a hundred years old or more. They were in dairy out west, but here they grew grape juice grapes. We didn’t start harvesting maple syrup until 1989. That evolved (in 1994) to operating a pancake house inside a greenhouse building.”

Maple Everything

The cold weather atop the Escarpment that challenged them to grow grapes proves particularly auspicious for maple syrup that needs cold nights and warm days to make the sap run. In fact, the

grape vines were recently removed in favour of popping corn that’s a mainstay of their fabulously popular Maple Kettle Corn.

Photos from that era line the walls of The Pancake House and depict a kiosk handing pancakes and maple baked beans for pa-



At the 19th-century station, Kelsey demonstrates making maple sugar taffy in the snow.



Andrew lets kids choose a slice of log which he then brands for them as a souvenir.

trons in snowsuits at picnic tables under a plastic cover.

“People started asking us to take them to see the bush operation, so we hitched up a big wagon behind a tractor and started running them out there. Then we added stations where we describe the process of gathering and refining maple sugar. Then we added the costumes for pre-Colonial time, then the 17th century, and it all just grew from there.”

The sugar processing that began on the farmhouse kitchen table in 1989 moved into a shed that’s now attached to the new restaurant where they serve brunch year round.

A small store where they sell maple-something for everyone has maple sugar candy, maple syrup in myriad manifestations, colours, shapes and sizes, maple kettle popcorn, maple fudge, maple granola, maple barbecue sauce, maple mustard, maple salad dressing, and maple butter.

“We want to show that maple sugar isn’t just for pancakes,” says Bering, whose website includes recipes for maple syrup and a run-down of products available online at whitemeadowsfarms.com. Almost all of it has been created and finished on site, including Black Angus beef from their 40-head herd, and almost all of it can be taste-tested in the evaporation room beside the store.

Outside Fun

He adds that they’re about to expand the store because “when one to two thousand people pass through here a day in the high season, it can get a little crowded.”

The family operation employs close to 70 people during the high season as actors and guides, or servers in the restaurant, many of them demonstrating the evolution of maple sugar processing from the pre-European native era to modern day.

It’s all very hands-on so that visiting kids can make maple taffy

on the snow, drill tree holes with a bit and auger, or saw a slice of log into a pancake-sized platter that can then be branded with a red-hot branding iron.

“It’s great to get the kids outside,” says financial overseer and matriarch Ann Bering. “People get to see the value in showing kids where food comes from and at the same time have fun.” School groups, daycare groups, busloads from the YMCA, and even groups from English as a Second Language classes show up.

“People from overseas really appreciate what they’re seeing when they come here since what they’re seeing is an element of Canadian history.”

They can follow the billowing steam and roaring fire from the evaporation room where they see a job that used to take several days conducted in about an hour and a half. Oh, and about three cords of wood a day.

Bering has also recently adopted measures to “minimize our carbon footprint.” They’ve supplemented heating with solar panels, replaced halogen lights with LED bulbs, reclaim waste and rainwater, compost on site and recycle just about everything else.

Currently the family operates about 5,000 taps in the trees that run downhill to the collection tank via flexible plastic tubing, but in the next few years they hope to double that number.

By the end of the season, the family will have processed close to 325,000 litres of raw sap into about 5,000 litres of sweet maple syrup, all on site. Meanwhile, the filtering machine needs new filters for the second time today, a job Richard conducts, despite the cold outside, wearing a T-shirt and his trademark top hat. **EV**

Chris Mills writes about the Niagara region from Fort Erie where he lives with his wife, son and two Maple Kettle Corn-loving dogs. He can be reached at chrismills.ca.